

Beyond Words: Mirroring Identities of Italian Postcolonial Women Writers

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Abstract

In the recent phenomenon of Italian postcolonial literature, the protagonists are often women writers. As subjects who are traditionally in a marginal social position, due to their origins and gender, they are in a better position than others to explore the theme of identity. In fact, they benefit from a double point of view on culture: ours and theirs. By revising colonial history and / or talking about migration to Italy, not only do they begin to speak and to re-appropriate their own identities, but they pursue their own personal search for more effective forms for expressing the complexity and the continuous negation of identities. In so doing, they go beyond literature, and pose important questions for other social sciences concerned with questions of identity, such as social anthropology.

Introduction

Postcolonial literature in Italy is quite a new phenomenon and its growth parallels the first migratory fluxes to the country at the beginning of the 1990s. Although groups of people originating from the former Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea)¹ were already living in Italian cities since the 1970s, it was with the greater migratory fluxes of the 1990s that a specific literature of migration, of which postcolonial literature is a part, developed. It is a marginal literature, lying outside the traditional canon, but it has been growing steadily in the last ten years.

Italian is the substantial presence of women writers. Their status, derived from their origins and gender, places them at the margin of any power position (Hooks, 1984). It is often women, among the post-colonized migrants, who begin speaking about their identity². This particular theme is one that

¹I am mostly interested in sub-Saharan Africa, therefore Libya and the few Libyan authors writing in Italian are not dealt with here.

²As the major Italian scholar of migrant literature, Armando Gnisci said in a recent interview that the presence of women writers in postcolonial Italian literature goes against the literary mainstream as of Francophone or Anglophone postcolonial literature (in *Shukran*, RaiTre, October 2008).

brings literature and social sciences closer. In their work, these women authors define identity as mobile and negotiated. Obviously, this vision of identity comes from their personal experiences as migrants. Beginning to speak can be an empowering process for powerless people, allowing them the opportunity to speak for themselves. Revising the history of Italian colonialism is a first step in this direction. For this reason in the following pages I want to give room to many quotations from the texts of these women authors, allowing them to use their own voices to narrate their own point of view. I do not want to talk about or talk on behalf of, but to talk close to the Other (Djebar 2000).

However, the social position of migrants is not simply marginal; they are in a liminal position in the sense that they stand in between two cultures. In fact most of these authors have acquired Italian citizenship; they were born in Italy, or have lived in Italy for many years. As wives, mothers, daughters and nieces, women are the ones who bridge their culture of origin with Italian culture. Their peculiar position allows them to position two cultures in relation with each other. This relationship is so deep that it can give rise to multiple identities within the same individual.

In my opinion, it is their liminal position that makes their texts deeply postcolonial. These women authors should not be considered postcolonial simply because they come from postcolonial countries. They are postcolonial because they have a postcolonial attitude, as described by Said in his book *Orientalism* (Said 1978). Not only do they propose a point of view on their identity different from ours, they also rework our own identity; postcolonialism is a deeply critical and dialogic intellectual attitude. These women reflect upon their own multiple identities as if their cultures were mirrors of each other.

A fundamental instrument of their reflection is writing itself. In fact, as Spivak points out, it is through texts that the world is 'worlding' (Spivak 1999). Spivak attributes to texts what Heidegger attributes to art: the power of worlding, that is, the power to give existence to reality. In a world dominated by the Western male point of view, which determines the canons and the tools used to describe reality, writing a text is the only way to bring to existence to subaltern reality: that of black women. The autobiographical experiences of the writers are basic to these texts and they are essential to our understanding of the importance of narration for them. For this reason, these writings are not easily classifiable into a single genre; they stand somewhere in between personal memory, autobiography, biography of others, family biography, novel, even historical documentation of oral sources. Most of the time these genres are blended together. Thus women authors use forms of experimental writing that can be of epistemological consequence for social

sciences. Can academic writing really express the empathy that social science researchers experience during field-work? Is our scientific language, created by Western males, appropriate to telling the points of view of Others? One answer to this question could come from a different branch of learning that lies within literature.

Reviewing Italian Colonialism

Undoubtedly, the greater merit of postcolonial women writers has been that of bringing multi-focality to bear on Italian colonialism, which has been discussed in both historical and political fields, but always from an Italo-centric point of view. For the first time the Other, women originated from the Horn of Africa, express their own point of view on Italian colonialism in their countries.

The Italian presence in the Horn of Africa began in 1882 with the occupation of Assab Bay and lasted until 1941, when the United Kingdom took command of the area. From the time when Crispi was Prime Minister, at the beginning of the colonialist era, the 'necessity' of Italian colonialism according to fascist propaganda was linked to the search for a so called fourth shore (*quarta sponda*) for Italian migrants who were leaving the country en masse during that same period³. This supposedly proletarian colonialism was presented and perceived as a double welfare strategy: helping the poorest parts of the Italian population, and civilizing the poor African population. According to Sandra Ponzanesi and the main historian on the Italian colonial past, Angelo del Boca, this perspective of Italian colonialism as 'good' colonialism has never been questioned by Italians; it is summarized in the popular expression 'Italians are good folks' (*italiani brava gente*). (Ponzanesi, 2000; Del Boca, 1992)

Postcolonial women writers do not question historical facts: actually, many historical studies, like the research of Angelo del Boca (1992) and Matteo Dominioni (2008), have demystified Italian propaganda. Women authors give us a different perspective on these facts, as is typical of the postcolonialist attitude.

For example, Gabriella Ghermandi (2007), who is Italian and Ethiopian, has collected oral accounts about the Italian colonial period among members of her own family and other witnesses. Opposing the written Italian version of history, Ghermandi points to the importance of orality to enable the emergence of the natives' point of view. However, in order to establish a

³However, the demographic aim of Italian colonialism was never achieved. As shown by Palma (1999), migrants preferred going to the Americas.

connection between Italian written culture and Ethiopian oral culture, it becomes necessary for Ghermandi to write down the oral narrations. This choice is expressed by the character of Malhet, who is entrusted by the elders of her family with the task of collecting the life histories of people during the colonial period. They tell her:

'(...) collect as many stories as you can. One day, you will be our telling voice. You will cross the sea that Peter and Paul crossed, and you will bring our stories to the land of the Italians. You will be the voice of our history which does not want to be forgotten'

(Ghermandi, 2007, p. 6).

When Malhet goes to Italy years later, she realizes the necessity of building a version of historical facts from crossed perspectives, she says:

'In Italy they are convinced to have been here as on a tourist trip, and to have embellished and modernized our miserly country with streets, houses and schools. (...). I have never answered because I did not know how to oppose this view, but today I know what I could say. We have paid for all that they have built. We have also paid for the buildings of the next three centuries. (...). It is past, but not enough not to revise it. We should give them our version of the facts'

(Ghermandi, 2007, p. 198).

The will to show another point of view is combined with the necessity of political and cultural confrontation.

Another writer who adds to the plurality of points of view is Martha Nasibù (2005), the only author to have written a real biography of her own family, instead of a fictional account. This text was inspired by the author's personal experiences, but also by the impact of the Other's world, in this case that of the Italians. In fact Martha Nasibù, daughter of the *degiac*⁴ Nasibù, was deported to Italy when Ethiopia was conquered by the Italians in 1936⁵. Years later she married an Italian man and had a child with him. Her intention of giving her family a historical and cultural inheritance that is unquestionably different from the one commonly proposed by the Italo-centric version, is clearly expressed by the author in the acknowledgments, at the end of her

⁴*Degiac* is a rank title in the feudal Ethiopic society.

⁵After the fall of the Ethiopian empire in 1936, high ranked nobility were killed or deported to Italy (almost 350 people), to prevent the growth of political resistance to the Italian government in the colony (Del Boca 1992).

book. In particular, referring to her Italian son Carlo, she stresses the necessity to put Italian and Ethiopian culture in relation to each other. She describes her book, in relation to her, as such:

'(...) a book that will become for him, as Italian, a point of reference allowing him to identify himself with Ethiopian culture and tradition, enriched by the Italian culture of his father'

(Nasibù, 2005, p. 248).

By revising history, postcolonial women authors have situated themselves at the connection point between past and present, and between Italian and African cultures.

The Woman's Body Knows

The most evident fact about the literature by authors originating in the former Italian colonies is the massive presence of women writers. This can be explained from many related points of view.

According to a common interpretation of history, women are the ones who suffered most from the colonial domination. Italian colonizers were mainly men, mostly soldiers; the majority of mixed couples were composed by an Italian man and a native woman. The uses and abuses of women's bodies, as mistresses and mothers, have become a crossroads for cultures.

There is also a clear political responsibility of the colonial government affecting the status of native women. The attitude towards the so-called *madamismo* (or *madamato*) allows us to understand the extent to which women's human rights were affected by the colonial experience (Palma, 1999; Ponzanesi, 2005). *Madama*, hence the word *madamismo*, is the Piedmontese-Italian term referring to a native woman living *more uxorio* (as if married) with an Italian man. At the beginning of the colonial period, the practice of *madamismo* was tolerated and even encouraged by the colonial government: in fact, it was considered as a partial solution to the epidemic of syphilis and other venereal diseases that were circulating among Italian men and African women in the brothels. According to Italian colonial law, a *madama* was not equal to a wife. Incidentally, many Italian men in the colony already had a wife in Italy⁶. On the other side, according to native laws, *madamato* was equated to *damoz*⁷, a form of temporary marriage practiced among the Amhara in

⁶At the beginning, Italian officers were not allowed to bring their wives to Africa (Palma, 1999, p. 48).

⁷The term *damoz* is a contraction of *demewez*, 'blood' and 'sweet' in Amharic, the language of the Amhara.

Ethiopia.

Temporary marriages are quite diffuse in Africa. They are a form of marriage between a man and a woman, where the man is in charge for the maintenance of the woman for a pre-arranged period of time, and pays in advance. On her part, the woman is committed to granting domestic and sexual services. At the end of that period, the marriage can either be cancelled or renewed. The woman cannot claim inheritance during or after such a marriage; however the children conceived during this period of time are recognized by the father and his family, and therefore they have the right to claim inheritance. Apparently this form of marriage was practiced among people of lower social status, and where there is a lack of housing opportunities. For this reason a *damoz* marriage can last, for instance, only two months. Among the Amhara it was an oral contract, agreed in front of witnesses. This contract was allowed by local laws up to the 1950s.

What strikes harder at the status of native women is the social and juridical position of the children conceived during their relationships with Italian men. Unlike *damoz* marriage, *madamoto* does not provide for the man's duty to recognise his children or for their rights to inheritance. The half-bred (*meticci*) children, as they were called then, had no Italian citizenship. Moreover, they were not recognized by their mother's family since, for the population of the Horn of Africa, descent is mainly patrilinear. When a relationship between an Italian man and a woman ended, she was left completely alone in taking care of her children. In Somali language, a halfbred individual is still called *missioni*, an Italian term meaning missions, because many half-bred children were brought up by Italian missionaries.

The status of native women became even worse during the fascist government. A warning sign of the 1938 racial laws, and a typical expression of the regime's rhetoric about the purity of the Arian and Latin race, the practice of *madamoto* was no longer tolerated. On 19 July 1937 the Decreto Regio 880 was declared, imposing the avoidance of any contact between the African and the Italian populations. Whoever was living with a *madama* could be repatriated and imprisoned from one to five years. Fascism established a real apartheid in the colony.

On the other hand, overturning the government's position concerning native women during the first period of the Italian colonization, prostitution was tolerated. So the only relationships allowed between black and white people put African people into a subjugated position as servant or prostitute. Some postcolonial women writers are particularly aware of the precarious position of native women during colonialism. For example, Ghermandi stated in an interview with Daniele Comberiati:

'In Ethiopia a woman has never been afraid to bring up her children by herself, without her husband, because she was supported by the local community. The laws on madamismo caused women's heads to bend down, because for the first time they were really powerless. Power was in the hands of the white men, not in theirs. Women were used to leaving their husband's houses themselves if something went wrong, they were not used to being chased away. That law has caused the heads of women of that generation and of the next one to bend low: this was obviously less violent for Ethiopian men, but women have suffered very hard consequences since that period. I always say that, in my family, colonialism has damaged four generations of women, and I am the last one'

(Comberiati 2007).

Native women and their children are the ones who suffered most from Italian colonialism. These people's sorrow is in their bodies: in the bodies of women violated in their rights, in the bodies of mixed race children deprived of fathers and of a community. Once again in the history of Africa, the bodies of black colonized women have been used by white colonized men.

As Ghermandi (2007) points out, this type of sorrow is deeply rooted into the abuse of Others' bodies, and it climbs up through generations. Today's postcolonial women writers are the heirs of that past, also in a biological sense. Continuity between the past and the present is performed by these authors both through oral transmission of history, and through the women's body remembering. A *meticcia*, to make use of the questionable term of the colonial past, is not only a biological inheritance. Bodies carry a trace of colonialism. Martha Nasibù, whose declared aim is a multifocal reconstruction of history, also emphasises the way in which her body remembers:

'At that time I was a child but making every effort many things emerge, thanks to intuition, to sensations, to smells, to visual images. Firstly they appear as fragile and confused memories and later, step by step, they show themselves clearly'

(Nasibù, 2005, p. 143).

Through their bodies, women as mistresses, mothers, daughters, victims of colonialism become the main venue for the meeting of cultures, in the past as well as in the present.

Identities in Between: Past and Present, Here and There, Literature and Social Sciences

Notwithstanding the short memory of Italians concerning their colonial past, Italy has kept up political and economic influence on the Horn of Africa until the 1990s. Ethiopia was returned by its British military ally to its legitimate king, Emperor Hailé Selassié, in 1941, only six years after the Italian aggression. Nevertheless the Emperor allowed Italians in his country to continue living there and to run their businesses. Italians left that country in great numbers only after 1974, when a communist government deposed Emperor Selassié and limited private proprieties. The same was true for Italians in Eritrea where the largest Italian community in Africa lived (around 100,000 Italians).

Ethiopia and Eritrea had a joint history until the independence of Eritrea in 1992⁸. Eritrea was under allied occupation until 1947, then it became a British protectorate until 1950 and, finally the U.N. declared it federated with the Ethiopian Empire in 1950⁹.

Somalia instead was ruled by the British from 1941 to 1949. In 1950 it was handed over for a decade to the *Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana della Somalia (AFIS)*, the Italian Fiduciary Administration of Somalia, which was supposed to prepare the former colony to political independence. Many scholars have shown that during the AFIS period the Italian government ruled the country as if it was still a colony (Aden and Petrucci, 1994; Del Boca, 1993). Italians continued to manage the great part of the local economy even after independence (1959), until the last years of Siad Barre's regime (1969-1990) (Aden and Petrucci, 1994)¹⁰. The end of the regime and the ensuing civil war, which is still going on, coincided with the end of the Italian influence in the region. Somalia was no longer a country where the Italian government and entrepreneurs could run profitable business.

But still today the encounter of cultures continues to occur through the

⁸Boundaries between the two countries have been created by Italian colonialism, when the Italian expansion was blocked by Ethiopians with the Adwa battle in 1896. Since then, also considering the different management of those territories after the Second World War, these regions have been separated, except for brief periods.

⁹In 1960 Eritrea was transformed into a province of the Ethiopian Empire. This has brought to the rise of an independence guerrilla since the 1960s. Later it degenerated into a civil war between different political factions about the future of the country, ending only around the end of the 1980s when one party of the guerrilla got the better, also chasing Ethiopians in 1991.

¹⁰Aden has shown the deep link between Siad Barre's socialist regime and Italian economic interests in Somalia, in the Eighties. Such interests were managed by the Italian left wing parties, Partito Socialista Italiano (P.S.I.) and the Partito Comunista Italiano (P.C.I.).

social phenomenon of migration from the Horn of Africa to Italy. Ethiopia, Somalia and the newly-born Eritrea have lived through very difficult political circumstances, with undemocratic regimes and civil wars. Since the 1970s many people have left these countries as refugees. Migration is both an opportunity for revising the past and for the realisation of the product of every cultural encounter – a mixed culture, a third culture resulting as a product of history and / or migration.

Particularly Igiaba Scego, of Somali descent, delves deeply into the issue of double identity. Her own biography reveals this – she was born in Italy because her parents left Somalia after Siad Barre's *coup* in 1969. She has Italian citizenship and lives in Rome. Sometimes she uses ironic and paradoxical terms to show the cultural encounter:

'In Rome people rush, in Mogadishu people never rush. I am in between Rome and Mogadishu: I hurry up'

(Scego, 2005, p. 5).

'Am I more Somali? Or Italian? Maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ Somali and $\frac{1}{4}$ Italian? Or vice-versa? I cannot answer! I have never fractionated myself before (...) I think I am a woman with no identity. Or rather with many identities. (...)'

(Scego, 2005, p. 28).

Going beyond literary fiction, during a radio interview Igiaba Scego explains:

'I am Roman but I am not certain about the rest. I do not like choosing among my identities. I feel myself to belong to the border generation, the crossroads generation. One is everything and its reverse, Italian and Somali or something else that goes beyond citizenship'¹¹

(Scego, 2007).

The theme of identity is also treated in more dramatic terms in Scego's first novel. Rhoda, the main character, is in between two cultures, Italian and Somali. She is in opposition both to her aunt Barni, who is still linked to Somalia despite her long lasting residence in Italy, and to her sister Aisha, who pushes for meeting the Italian culture.

Rhoda becomes a prostitute. When she discovers that she is HIV positive, she goes back to Somalia, where she is killed while resisting a rape attempt. Rhoda's body shows the scars of the cultural encounter. In fact it has

¹¹Interview to Igiaba Scego in 'Damasco', Radio Tre, 24 December 2007

been violated during her lifetime by her clients, at the moment of her death by the war, and even after her death, because the corpse was exhumed to be robbed.

Again, a violated female body becomes the symbol of cultural encounter. It is the case of the main character of Cristina Ubi Ali Farah's novel, *Domenica Axad* (2007). She is caught in between the separation of her Somali father from her Italian mother, between two different worlds and cultures. She develops self-injurious behaviours and only stops this habit once she is able to 'knot the threads together again', using the metaphor that recurs throughout the whole novel; the threads of her own double identity and that of her people, the identity lost in the diaspora after the Somali civil war, which started in 1990. The theme of identity is presented in the incipit of her novel:

'Somali baan ahay¹², like my half which is a whole. I am a thin thread, so thin that it threads and stretches longer. So thin that it does not break. And the tangle of threads widens showing the knots, clear and tightly drawn even when drawn apart from each other, knots that won't come undone'

(Farah, 2007, p. 1).

The theme of multiple identities is what brings closer Italian postcolonial literature and the debates in social sciences.

As Bowman (1997) has shown, where modernism was based on the reduction of the Other to the (Western) Self, post-modernism and its claim for relativism have underlined the radical separation of the Self and the Other. The Other cannot be understood or told outside its own categories. The risk of such a relativist attitude is incommunicability between cultures (Bowman 1997).

In my opinion the point of view of postcolonial Italian writers cannot simply be equated to the point of view of the Other. In fact these authors enjoy the possibility of having a double perspective on reality – theirs, as Other, and also ours, as part of the Self. As biological or migrated inheritance, these women are a part of the Self. They have a double identity and enjoy a double point of view.

Stressing their multiple identities, postcolonial women writers have

¹²Translation from Somali: *Somali I am*. This is the refrain of a poem composed by Cabdulqaadir Xirsi Siyaad, 'Yamyam', 1977. He was one of the most important poets of socialist Somalia and his writings, which were among the firsts since Somali became a written language in 1972, were diffused by radio.

avoided making a radical separation between the Self and the Other. Moreover, they have shown how the Other is a part of the Self, how identities are built and negotiated. Both modernist and post-modernist attitudes are based on the difference between the subject of research and its object. Whether emic or etic categories have been used to study the Other, the subject and the object, Us and the Other have been always clearly defined. The specific positioning of these authors, both as Other and as part of the Self, shows that a clear distinction between subject and object no longer exists.

In this case, the way in which these women authors have tackled literary themes of identity can also help the methodological discourse in the social sciences, showing the confusion of multiple identities, between Self and Other, subject and object. This confusion should not be considered in a negative or moral way: it simply reminds us of the complexity involved in the negotiation of every identity, theirs and ours.

Narrating Problems

In the last twenty years, social sciences, especially social anthropology, have faced many problems on how to report other people's experiences. Since the publication of *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), the great distance between fieldwork and writing has been shown. Even if ethnographies have been produced substantially by natives, they hardly reflect the way how tales have been told to the anthropologists by natives. Anthropological essays and monographs, the classical literary genres used by anthropologists, cannot transmit what is there, beyond the simple passage of information between the anthropologist and the natives, that is to say the empathy built up during the human relationship between subject and object of the research during fieldwork.

This issue is common to other social sciences, such as sociology and psychology. If the word first, and then the text, structure the way we understand the Other, are Western scientific texts fit to describe the Other's points of view? The solution to this impasse has been partially proposed by Clifford in the introduction of *Writing Cultures*: social anthropology should adopt more experimental forms of writing that could show better the dialogic nature of anthropological knowledge. That which is produced by two voices, Ours and Theirs.

Today, more than twenty years after *Writing Culture*, ethnography is still linked to the anthropological classical genre. As many feminist

anthropologists underline, women anthropologists seem especially distant from literary experimentation. Ruth Behar has listed many reasons under the definition 'anxiety of authorship' (Behar, 1995, p. 15). By quoting Lila Abu-Lughod, Behar underlines that women anthropologists must fit into the dominant ways of writing or else they could lose academic authorship. It seems that women anthropologists are not allowed to experiment. In the history of social anthropology there is a well known case: Evans Pritchard defined the exuberant writing style of Margaret Mead as '*Rustling-of-the-Wind-in-the-Palm-Trees School*'.

I believe that postcolonial women writers have done what seems to be barred to women anthropologists, not only using writing experimentation as a simple expression of the plurality of points of views, but as a strategy to enquire about empathy during the cultural encounter.

It is clear that the choice of genre, that is the hybridisation of many literary genres, adopted by postcolonial women writers, reflects the plurality of their points of view. Their texts are not entirely novel or biography or autobiography or historical, or ethnographical documents.

In the same way, many women writers have structured the plot devoting one chapter to every character: (s)he will be the narrator of the facts according to her/his point of view (Ghermandi, 2007; Scego, 2003, 2008; Farah, 2007).

According to my point of view, the choice of which language to use is even more meaningful. Geneviève Makaping (2001), an Italian anthropologist born in Cameroon, who still perceives herself as the Other because she is a black woman, points to the difficulty of re-defining her identity moving from the position of object to the one of subject of research. She would like to tell her identity according to her point of view, by using her language, thus deconstructing a tradition that conceived her simply as the object. She says:

'Which language should I speak to them? Can they understand my language? The language of the powerless? The language of sorrow and poverty?'

(Makaping, 2001, p. 42)

'Writing is still hard. Can this incredible invention be really a good way to tell? To tell my life?'

(Makaping, 2001, p. 45).

It is not only a problem of code as Makaping (2001) underlines. It is a linguistic problem: which language should be used when you have more than

one mother-tongue? Armando Gnisci calls the migrant writers translingual writers, writers who write in between two or more languages (Gnisci 2007). These texts are defined as Italian postcolonial literature because the main language is Italian. But Italian is not the only language present in these texts, and it is not taken for granted that it should be.

This is also the case with Ribka Sibhatu, an Eritrean migrant to Italy. Her book (1993) is worded in two languages, Italian and Tigrin, as each is the parallel translation of the other. But the main question is which is the parallel translation for the author? She has written both of the texts and she admits they are both in her mother-tongue.

Gabriella Ghermandi writes some parts in Amharic, written using the Amharic alphabet, in her novel (2007, pp. 215-218). The striking element is not the presence of another alphabet in the text, but the device that the author uses to include it. The part in Amharic is a letter that an Ethiopian woman migrant in Italy sends to her family in Africa. She cannot write in Amharic, so an old Italian man, who was an officer in Ethiopia during the fascist occupation, writes it on her behalf. The Amharic as written language becomes part of that lady's culture through the mediation of a former colonizer. This literary expedient demonstrates perfectly the mirroring identities of both former colonizers and colonized. In fact the novel is written in Italian so as 'not to allow them [the Italians] the possibility of forgetting' (Ghermandi, 2007, p. 57), at the same time it shows how the Ethiopic identity has been strengthened by the presence of the Italians because the migrant lady learns how to write her own language through the migration process to Italy.

Cristina Ubi Ali Farah (2007) gives a deeper analysis of the opportunity of using the Italian language to express a multiple identity. In this case, as well as others, the author uses a literary expedient: the main character, Domenica Axad, has a Somali father and an Italian mother (like the author herself). She spent her childhood in Mogadishu where she is the translator for her mother, who never learnt Somali. When her parents divorced she moved to Italy with her mother and stopped speaking Somali, thus erasing a part of her identity. When she went back to Mogadishu, at the beginning of the civil war in 1990, sent by her mother who hoped for a reconciliation with her former husband, Domenica Axad stopped talking altogether. In a letter to her psychoanalyst, she explains:

'My silence was not traumatic; it was a willing, aware silence. But beyond the silence there was something else, more difficult to understand. (...). It was the trauma of the missing come back, the impossibility of meeting my father

and the awareness that my mother and I were separate individuals'

(Farah, 2007, p. 253).

Facing a loss of identity, Domenica Axad chooses not to have a language in which to speak. In the same way, confronted by racism which makes one wonder about identity, Geneviève Makaping also chooses silence for a while. She writes:

'I chose silence. Simply, I too could not want my voice to be heard. I believe that behaviour, I do not know to what extent it was premeditated, worked as a defence. (...). My choice was aware, not even suffered, it was a cold choice'

(Makaping, 2001, p.38).

Silence is a first strategy employed to tackle a crisis of identity. Later, the necessity to narrate, either writing or telling stories, comes up strongly. Also another author, Cristina Ubi Ali Farah (2007) tells us that she had been 'a sort of incurable scribbler' when she lived in Mogadishu, and that she had stopped writing for many years from the time she escaped to Italy (Comberiati 2007). The whole novel is conceived as a tale told by many voices, differing from chapter to chapter. According to Farah, a mother-tongue is that which one uses to talk, not to write. This is clear in Domenica Axad's words:

'I talk in a complicated way, using involved constructions. I do it mainly at the beginning of a tale, because I want to show as much as I can through language, I want everyone to know without doubt that this language is mine. It is my babble, it is the plural subject that makes me grow, it is the name of my essence, it is my mother'

(Farah, 2007, pp. 253-254).

The choice to speak (and to write) in Italian is not conscious when it is forced by the necessity of migration, but become conscious when it is perceived as part of one's identity, 'my half which is a whole', as Farah says in the incipit of her novel (2007). The whole novel can be seen as a passage from orality to the written text of that letter. Like in Ghermandi's novel (2007), the plot is completed when the main character collects oral tales, and finally writes them down. Farah says about her writing: 'I write in Italian stories that I listened to in Somali' (Comberiati, 2007, p. 46). For the main characters of both Ghermandi and Farah's novels, writing in Italian means accepting a part of their identity but also, importantly, means that their identity is composed of many parts. These are not in harmony or in opposition; they are simply

juxtaposed.

Igiaba Scego also shows a similar conclusion through the character of Zuhra, a Somali girl of Somali origins:

'I wonder if my mother's mother-tongue can be a mother for me. If Somali language sounds similar in our mouths. How do I speak our mother-tongue? (...). I stumble over my confused alphabet. Words are all twisted. (...). Every sound is contaminated. Anyway, I try to talk with her (with her mother) this language that joins us. (...). But then, every time, in every talk, word, sigh, the other mother rises. The one that nursed Dante, Boccaccio, De Andrè and Alda Merini. The Italian language that brought me up, and that I sometimes hated because it made me feel like a stranger. (...). I could not choose any other language to write, to allow the soul come out. Writing in Somali is not the same'

(Scego, 2008, pp. 442-443).

Both Farah and Scego have underlined the separation between written and spoken language that Ghermandi has just announced.

A further elaboration of the language debate comes from the one whom I consider to be the most experimental postcolonial woman writer, Maria Abbebù Viarengo. In her work, different languages are juxtaposed in the written form. She was born in Ethiopia from a Piedmontese father and an Oromo mother. Her autobiography, mainly written in Italian, has large parts both in Piedmontese patois and in Oromo; even the official headline is in Oromo. An Italian publisher put the book on the market changing the Oromo headline into the correspondent Italian translation without her approval. A dispute arose, centred on linguistic issues because Viarengo refused and still refuses any translation in the text or in the field notes, and even to add a glossary at the end of the book. Due to marketing, publishers are not willing to publish a text that could be hardly understood by the majority of the readers. During a meeting, Viarengo made clear to me her point of view:

'It is my autobiography: I think, I dream, I write using the languages that I have met in my life: Italian, Piedmontese, Oromo, Arabic and English'¹³. This is what I am. In my mind I do not translate when I think a word in a language'

(Interview with Viarengo).

¹³Viarengo was born in Ghidami, Ethiopia, but spent her childhood all over the Horn of Africa, and also in Sudan, where she learnt English and Arabic.

Also for Viarengo, the choice of a language does not mean choosing a monolithic identity, an identity which excludes others. It rather symbolizes the awareness of the plural identities inhabiting migrants. For example, Viarengo had Oromo as a mother-tongue, but because of the many relocations 'slowly other languages took over Oromo' (Comberiati, 2007, p. 159). For this reason in Viarengo's text, languages are juxtaposed; they are as they are, without any mediation.

I believe that it is the lack of translation that makes Viarengo's text highly empathetic. Anthropologists also enquire into issues of linguistic and cultural translation, as it is through translation that many original meanings are lost. The cultural paradigm of relativism, proposed by Clifford Geertz (1973) in order to preserve empathy, works by keeping up the separation between the Self and the Other. But, at the end, this radical separation does not allow communication between cultures or empathy. Separation is not the best way to express empathy. The difficulties of establishing a direct connection between the field and writing do not necessarily lead to linguistic or cultural untranslatability, nor do they imply incommunicability. For instance, a foreign language can be learnt even without using a glossary. It will take longer, but at the end one can understand and communicate with other people.

The case of postcolonial women writers, and in particular the case of Maria Viarengo, shows clearly that difficulty in translation does not imply the impossibility to communicate. Also, in the case of Viarengo, lack of translation does not mean that the author does not want to communicate. Her autobiography does not want to be solipsistic writing. Rather, her work is the concrete expression of the plurality of identities, a creative and experimental writing that gives an idea of the cohabitation of more than one identity within an individual.

Nevertheless, I think that the potentiality of untranslated expression goes beyond the juxtaposition of languages and identities. In the case of willing untranslatability, such as Viarengo's, the same untranslatability is meaningful. The unsaid, the not-immediately-understandable, the untranslated, amplify the text's meanings: these are the best ways to represent the almost schizophrenic dimension of those who live in between two cultures. Through this literary expedient, Viarengo sets a new perspective for the writing of social sciences, especially for social anthropology. Since anthropologists have always been involved in translation, they have forgotten the meaningful importance of untranslation. A complete translation is not necessary, nor is it always possible.

Difficulties of narrating human relations and multiple identities through

writing pose problems not only to social scientists, but also to postcolonial women writers facing the same question. In particular, Cristina Ubi Ali Farah, with the character and in the telling of Domenica Axad's story, provides an example of the difficulty in telling the voices, people, languages and spaces that inhabit the Somali diaspora around the world. Somali migrants of diaspora are continuously migrating, and thus the process of negotiating their identities is endless. For this reason, Domenica Axad finds the limits of the word, and proposes a new way of searching: documentary film.

'(...) Well, the places. It is so hard to tell them. But maybe with the camera you can domesticate those involving smells and sounds'

(Farah, 2007, p. 113).

Many anthropologists come to the same conclusions, looking for new ways of expression. For example, Ruth Behar, an anthropologist born from Jew parents who escaped from Europe to Cuba and then to the United States, adds to her academic publications with poetry, tales, and a documentary film. Audio-visual equipment does not guarantee greater objectivity, but perhaps it can express better the tri-dimensionality and dialectical nature of anthropological research.

Gabriella Ghermandi, who calls herself a writer and tale-teller, transforms the word from a written text to a multimedia performance. She tells her writings during performances in which the written word becomes tale and also music, because she sings her tales in Amharic. During her performances, Ghermandi does not place the stress on the word as a way to build empathy with people; rather she points to a sort of multisensorial perception through music, lights, voice and song.

Postcolonial writers are not skilled anthropologists and neither do they want to be. Nevertheless, they have given anthropologists many issues to discuss and great experimental formal ways to do it. As often happens, the Other gives us another way to think about ourselves.

Conclusions

Italian postcolonial literature brings up many debates raised within the social sciences in the last decades. Not only has the theme of multiple identities and their continuous negotiations been developed, but also forms of experimental writing about it even if stressing the limit of the word. A reflection about identity is crucial for postcolonial studies. These women authors work to find the more appropriate ways to express the complexity of

identity. In so doing they need to call for linguistic strategies that lead to the limit of the language itself.

In the same way they lead to an epistemological enquiry about writing in social sciences and especially in social anthropology. When the distinction between the Other and the Self is no more, when we realize that the Other is a part of the Self, then there is no longer a distinction between Subject and Object. Identities are built according to each others' mirroring, and not through one's single point of view on the Other.

The importance of narrating itself is deeply postcolonial for people who have always been the Objects of the colonizers' narration. Beginning to speak and to write have been very important steps for women wishing to reappropriate their own identity as Subjects: as marginal people, speaking and writing by themselves about themselves has empowered their position. As Spivak pointed out, through their writings women are 'worlding the world' (Spivak, 1999).

Nevertheless, Italian postcolonial women writers have shown that this is not enough. A further consideration about *how* to speak about themselves has been crucial for the definition of one's identity. Far from being a simple literary question, formal issues about writing have become a way to shift this question onto an epistemological level. Whether or not the word is an appropriate way to express one's identity is not the main point. Surely narration is a crucial fact per se for these women authors, but it goes beyond the words. Nevertheless, the multidimensionality of their narrations is not a strategy to reaffirm their Selves with greater intensity. It is rather the consequence of an epistemological reflection about the power and the limits of the word, written in the language of the oppressor. They are struggling to have their own language in which to express themselves. Their literary experimentation, including their strategies to make words more meaningful and to go beyond the word itself, should be placed into this frame.

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